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NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
21 MAY 1978

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Colby, Wm.
Silent Missions
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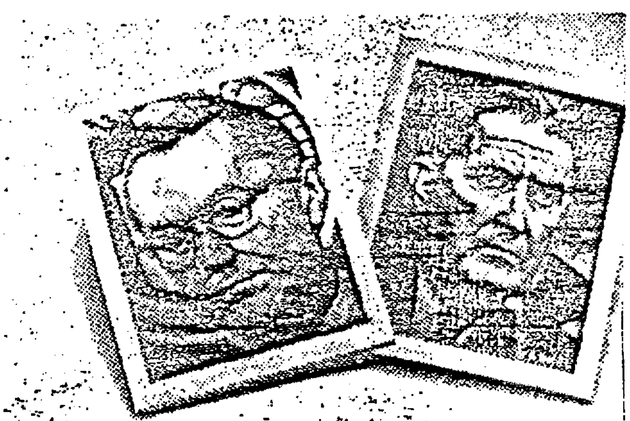
P-Powers, Thomas
(orig under Honorables)



William Colby and Vernon Walters.

Spy Stories

HONORABLE MEN
My Life in the CIA.
By William Colby.
Illustrated. 493 pp. New York:
Simon and Schuster. $12.95.

SILENT MISSIONS
By Vernon A. Walters.
Illustrated. 654 pp. New York: Doubleday & Co. $12.95.

By THOMAS POWERS

When the Central Intelligence Agency's secrets began to tumble out in their melancholy profusion three years ago, veterans of the agency warned that it would not be easy to put the lid back on, more questions would be raised than answered, and the process of exposure would leave the practice of intelligence in demoralized disarray. At the time, such arguments were roughly dismissed as disingenuous, motivated less by honest concern for "national security" — fast replacing patriotism as the last refuge of scoundrels — than by fear of embarrassment. But it turns out the Cassandras were absolutely right: the code-breaking computers may still be humming, the satellites clicking off their high-resolution photos and the mighty river of paper working its way toward the National Security Council, but nothing else is the same. The intelligence community is divided and confused, just as predicted, and there is probably no better place to go for a glimpse of the awful mess than the memoirs of William Colby, Director of the C.I.A. from 1973 to 1976.

It may come as a surprise to most readers to learn that the intelligence community blames Mr. Colby, not nosy reporters or the Congressional investigators of 1975, for the uglier revelations of recent years, but that is the case. Few men have suffered such dissonant reputations. The public probably remembers Mr. Colby best as the architect of the notorious Phoenix program in South Vietnam, which totted up the deaths of at least 20,000 Vietcong political cadremen; or as a peripheral Watergate figure who, in 1973, "danced around the room" to avoid giving John Ehrlichman's name to the Federal prosecutors. But for C.I.A. people, Mr. Colby is the man who may have wrecked the agency with his decision to let out the "bad secrets" concerning assassination plots, domestic intelligence programs, illegal drug-testing and the like. While at least one segment of the public is inclined to see Mr. Colby as a war criminal, his former comrades think of him as a prig and snitch, a turncoat (or worse) who delivered secret files by the cartload to the Pike and Church committees, who told a reporter about the C.I.A.'s illegal mail-intercept program in order to engineer the removal of an archrival, and who gave the Justice Department evidence that suggested that Mr. Colby's immediate predecessor but one, Richard Helms, had lied to the Senate about C.I.A. political operations in Chile. When Mr. Colby finally left the C.I.A. early in 1976, his departure was not loudly lamented.

At first, or even third, glance William Egan Colby seems an unlikely candidate for such heated controversy. His appointment as Director of Central Intelligence in mid-1973 seems to have been made in a fit of absent-mindedness while Richard M. Nixon was busy plugging leaks in the White House levees. Certainly there was nothing inevitable about it.

For the most part Mr. Colby's years in the C.I.A. were unexceptional, a steady climb from job to job in a manner that neither made enemies nor left much by way of anecdote among his friends. In the early 1950's he organized stay-behind nets in Scandinavia to harass Russian occupiers in the event of a third world war. A few years later, he orchestrated C.I.A. support in Italy for the Christian Democrats and backed the "opening to the left" that brought Italian Socialists into the Government, despite opposition (by the C.I.A.'s James Angleton, among others) contending that the Communists would not be far behind.

In 1959 Mr. Colby moved on to Vietnam to help gear up for the war he still feels we never should have lost. As chief of station in Saigon, chief of the Far East division in the clandestine-services section of the C.I.A. and head of the Phoenix program, Mr. Colby spent 12 years trying to do what the French had failed to achieve before him. Vietnam absorbs the largest part of his book, as it did his life, and one is tempted to linger over his astonishing (to me) inability to notice any but the most particular causes of failure.

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